

## FOLLOW-UP: CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND OTHERS WHILE IN CUSTODY

### BEING ABLE TO MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHILE IN CUSTODY IS AN ESSENTIAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING PROTECTIVE FACTOR

In 2018 we undertook a review into prisoners' ability to maintain contact with family and friends while in custody. We returned to this subject again in 2025, largely because it remains a constant source of complaint and grievance raised with us by people in custody and their families.

The findings from our 2025 Review broadly align with those of 2018. While the Department has made progress in areas like phone affordability and digital infrastructure planning, the reality on the ground remains challenging for people in custody trying to maintain family contact. People in custody continue to have difficulty getting access to phones - the most common means of contacting family, and the availability and quality of in-person social visits remains a major cause of concern.

The importance and benefits of people in custody being able to maintain some connection with the outside world via contact with family and friends ought not be underestimated. Social visits are not just a nice to have privilege, they are an entitlement - albeit with some limitations - that is set out in the *Prisons Act 1981* and the *Prisons Regulations 1982*.

People in custody being able to maintain contact with family and friends is also an essential health and wellbeing protective factor, as well as having a major impact on the behaviour of individuals and thereby the safety and security of the facility. This is supported by our experience visiting prisons and detention centres, and research which shows the positive impact this can have on the wellbeing and rehabilitation prospects of people in custody (Taylor, et al., 2023).

There have been significant changes in the custodial environment between 2018 and 2025. Most recently we are seeing significant increases in prison populations leading to overcrowding and enormous strain on infrastructure. Almost every facility is at maximum operational capacity. On top of this, is the impact of staff shortages and dated infrastructure that has not kept pace with the demands of an expanding population. Consequently, prisoner support services are stretched to their limits.

This has made it increasingly difficult for custodial facilities to provide adequate access to phones and social visits. We regularly hear from prisoners that there are not enough phones in their unit, that their available time out of cell is insufficient for everyone to have access to phones, that social visits are often difficult to book, and when they are they are often cancelled at short notice. We have also heard that the quality of social visits at some facilities have been reduced by contact restrictions and physical barriers that are still in place from COVID-era precautions.

We are aware of the Department's current work to address staffing issues, with the immediate focus on increased recruitment of custodial staff. Our recently released report on non-custodial staffing shortages identified some early initiatives to address the issue, but these will take considerable time to have an impact. Also, a significant degree of uncertainty remains about plans to address system-wide infrastructure issues.

Relevantly, the Department's Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy and the Offender Digital Services Platform offer promise. However, past delays in implementation and lack of agreed funding for later stages indicates meaningful change is likely to be years away. The digital telephone upgrade currently planned, while necessary, will not increase handset availability or enable in-cell calls, which is a missed opportunity for improvement.

It is pleasing the Department supported our recommendation to improve support for both prisoners and their families to encourage better use of e-visit technology. But to be clear, we see e-visits as a valuable supplement, not a substitute for in-person contact. The Department must invest in both infrastructure and staffing to ensure people in custody can maintain vital connections with their families. Without this, the Department risks undermining rehabilitation efforts and the wellbeing of those in its care.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Sarah Palmer for her work as principal analyst for this review, and Scott Young as the final drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

**Inspector of Custodial Services**

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